



The Campbell Gardens Ladies' Swimming Class

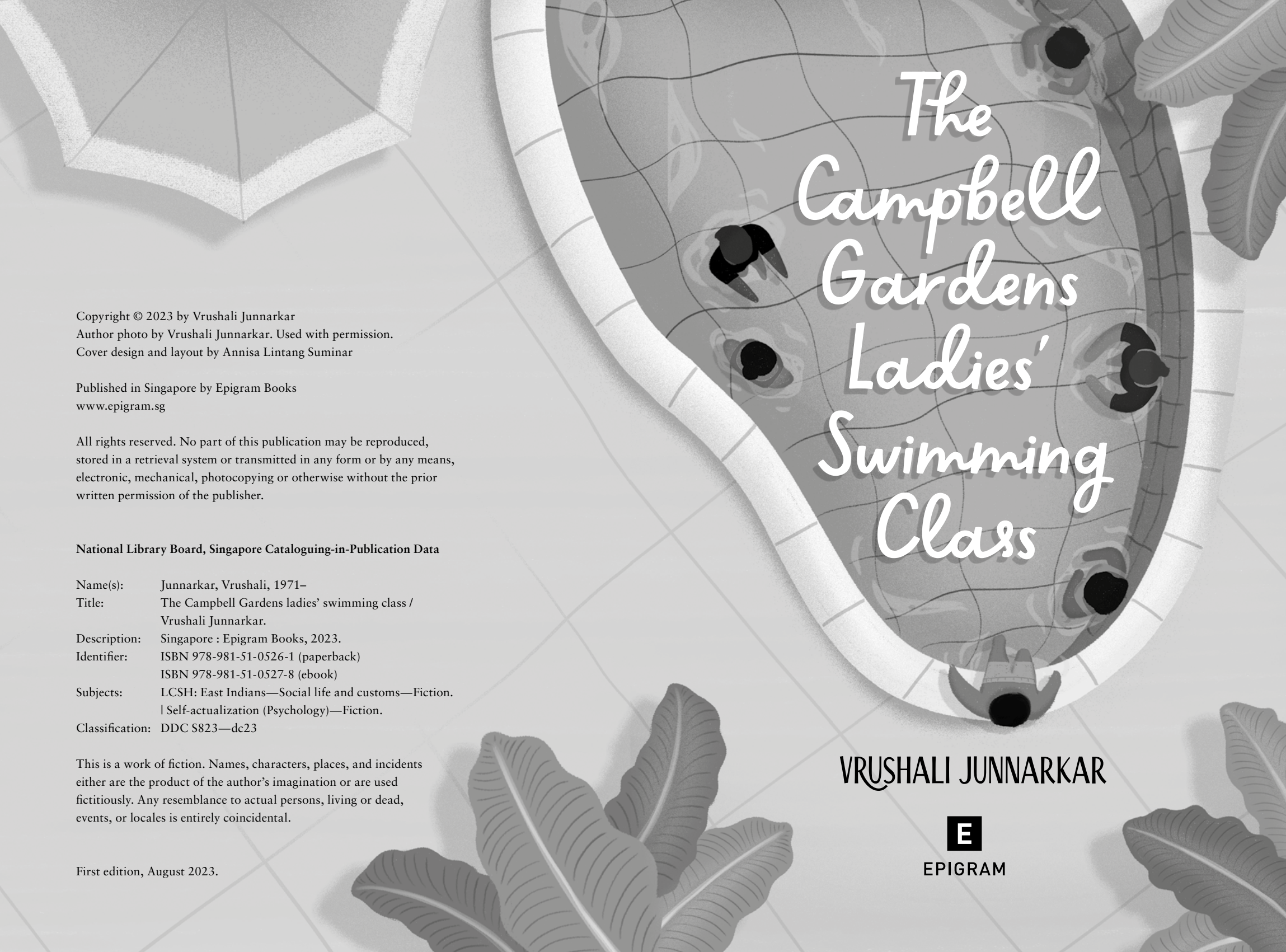
VRUSHALI JUNNARKAR

“A story about women coming together, bonding through their hesitations towards water. Beneath the surface and the lighthearted exchanges of women learning to swim is a rich interior world of middle-aged women who are balancing cultures and identities, insecurities and independence.”

**-Carissa Foo, author of *What We Learned from Driving in Winter*
and EBFP 2023 judge**

“For an interconnected group of women living in a condominium, swimming becomes not just a metaphor for cultural adaptation and survival, but also for personal freedom, transcendence and even redemption in this heart-warming novel.”

-Cyril Wong, multi-award-winning author of *This Side of Heaven*



The Campbell Gardens Ladies' Swimming Class

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www.epigram.sg

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National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name(s): Junnarkar, Vrushali, 1971–
Title: The Campbell Gardens ladies' swimming class /
Vrushali Junnarkar.
Description: Singapore : Epigram Books, 2023.
Identifier: ISBN 978-981-51-0526-1 (paperback)
ISBN 978-981-51-0527-8 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: East Indians—Social life and customs—Fiction.
I Self-actualization (Psychology)—Fiction.
Classification: DDC S823—dc23

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

First edition, August 2023.

VRUSHALI JUNNARKAR

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EPIGRAM

*For my swim coach R, and the anchors in my world:
my parents, sister, husband, daughter and baby W*

Chapter 1

HER EYELIDS QUIVERED rapidly, barely concealing the yearnings of the heart. The fluttering dark lashes seemed to be fanning a passionate fantasy...

A figure in a glossy orange one-piece swimsuit with black metallic stripes along the sides flitted through the clear, cobalt blue fluid of the Olympic-sized pool. Swishing confidently through the water, left and right arms moving in rhythmic succession, her ankles flapping speedily in tandem, carrying her forward in the smooth, cooling expanse. She swam the fifty-metre length in a matter of seconds, her straight orange-black hair streaming behind her. Upon reaching one end, her body curled slickly like a gymnast as she expertly somersaulted, turned around and kicked off to take another lap, this time taking a few microseconds to glide through the length of the pool. It was easy. No one was watching. All she had to do was keep her arms and legs moving and pretend to be a fish. There was an inexplicable thrill in swimming alone.

Then suddenly, just as she was lost in this enjoyment,

someone pulled the plug out of the bottom of the pool. Much like the emptying of a flooded bathtub, the pool water gushed and glogged down the drain hole. The water level dipped as she tried desperately to keep herself afloat. It was so simple. So long as her arms and legs moved a little more rapidly, she was fine.

The mosaic of shiny, slippery, light-blue tiles lining the pool appeared exposed along the edges. Soon, the pool lay drained and the blue lining changed to a plain, grey, dry, concrete roughness. Nevertheless, in the empty, parched pool, she continued swimming, faster and even better. Magically, she was still afloat, but the exertion was now tiring her. How long could she keep this up? Surprisingly, she felt dampness on her face and neck even though the water had disappeared. The glogging in her ears continued uninterrupted while her heart throbbed against the swimsuit.

The joyous swimming continued. She felt a jellyfish tickle her feet as she tried hard to keep her feet paddling. A large, white, slimy stingray now appeared out of the slit-like drain at the side of the pool and grew bigger. She looked into its amused eyes as it smiled a benign smile and inched itself close to her. Slapping her shoulder, it went on its way, soaring through the waterless pool.

"Aai, Aai, I am hungry," it said.

Huh? she wondered.

"Aai, I want to go down and play. Amit is calling me. Aai, wake up. Aai, I want to go down."

Suchi felt her shoulder being shaken. With a jolt, she opened her eyes. Her palms were still beating against the mattress when she saw her eight-year-old son, Parth, attempt to tickle her feet again.

Suchi looked around her bedroom. With her body bathed in perspiration, she took a few seconds to savour her just-concluded delicious dream, especially the last portion. She had forgotten to draw the curtains before dozing off, and Singapore's afternoon sun was beating down on her. She tried to close her eyes and restart the dream, but it was over. She was disappointed.

"Aai, I am hungry. Why are you smiling? Can I go down?"

"What? No! No, Parth, you cannot go down. It's too hot. It's the afternoon." *Ask Baba to give you something to eat*, she wanted to say. "What is Baba doing?"

"He is watching TV."

"Okay, that means I have to get up," she mumbled, wearily accepting the end of her brief mid-day siesta.

Suchi shook off her slumber and wiped off the sweat with the back of her hand, still reeling from the bliss of her make-believe water-world. She smiled more than usual. Her somersaults had been precise and near-perfect in her imagination. But what made her smile wider was that she had managed to squeeze herself into a one-piece orange swimsuit, resembling one of the beautiful orange-and-silver koi that swam in the fish pond below her flat.

She made a half-hearted attempt to neaten her hair as she hobbled to the sink and splashed water on her face, shaking herself out of her reverie. *Oh! What am I dreaming?* she thought bashfully, as she looked into her own dark brown eyes in the mirror and adjusted the lopsided maroon bindi on her forehead. *I cannot even swim.*

Her husband Mandar growled and grunted in his sleep, louder than the soft whirring of the overhead air-conditioner in the living room and the cricket match playing on the television.

Legs dangling over the sofa arm at one end, hands hanging over the edge, one hand still gripping the remote control. When he wasn't watching cricket, it was some Indian show where people were screaming over each other, predisposing them to a heart attack or at least laryngitis. This was Mandar's idea of fun, and she certainly did not deny him these little pleasures.

Suchi wondered what he was dreaming about. Did he have bizarre dreams like her? And why was he gripping the remote so tightly, in any case? Did he think she was going to snatch it away and watch some Hindi soap instead? The two of them always had a healthy competition over the remote control, but on Sundays she magnanimously let him win.

Suchi left Mandar to his unknown fantasies. He was now snorting and slowly rolling towards the edge of the sofa. The cardamom-laced, cashew nut-embellished, delicately spiced rice and vegetable dish of masale bhaat that she had cooked for lunch had had its desired soporific effect. The fresh green tondli had been sourced from a vegetable stall in the market at Little India. There had been much confusion curating the ivy gourd vegetable, which went by different names; the nearby local supermarket labelled it "gentleman's toes", which made Suchi decide that it was too risky to try. Not only had she trudged all the way by train to Little India to buy half a kilo of the tondli vegetable, but she had also spent half an hour splitting each little gentleman's toe vertically and painstakingly grating fresh coconut for the dish. Her efforts however, were worth it, since the lip-smacking, finger-licking masale bhaat had left the family fully satiated—or "trupta!" as her mother would say in Marathi. No wonder Suchi had dozed off too. Parth was the only one who hated afternoon

siestas. All he wanted to do was go down to the ground floor and play.

Suchi ambled to the kitchen, feeling refreshed despite the interrupted nap. The kitchen was the smallest room in their eighth-storey "2BHKU" flat in Campbell Gardens. "2BHK" was the Indianism for "two-bedroom-hall-kitchen", but in Singapore there was an additional "U" that stood for "utility room", an open-air, balcony-like room for washing clothes and stowing Parth's bicycle, scooter, extra shoes and the family's endless clutter. The kitchen had glass jalousie windows that looked onto the utility room, but these were permanently shut, since dust and smells (especially *non-veg* ones) from people's homes often came wafting through any openings on this side of the flat; the aroma of freshly made sambar or dried fish mixed with soy sauce titillated or offended depending on one's taste.

On one wall of the utility room was the garbage chute, a covered rectangular hole in the wall, through which you chucked your rubbish down a shaft that led to a huge garbage skip. And there were large open windows that faced the utility rooms across the eighth storey, and those above or below. In fact, from the first storey to the tenth, one could look, hear and smell into each other's utility rooms and lives. It was live entertainment all day and night in this high-rise building.

The many sights and sounds assaulted the senses. Dogs barked until they went hoarse. Couples squabbled, sometimes shouting their lungs out in assorted languages. Maids washed clothes and shook them out violently until they were wrinkle-free. Precocious mini-Mozarts practised their piano tunes over and over again. Off-key bathroom singers crooned like they were competing for

American Idol or *Asia's Got Talent*. Ma'ams shouted out orders at their maids. Garbage was thrown noisily through the chutes. One could never feel lonely in such clamorous company.

The high-pitched whistle of a pressure cooker suddenly echoed out from another storey. *Ah...that would be an Indian household*, observed Suchi. *No one else uses pressure cookers in Singapore. Wonder who is already cooking Sunday dinner? Doesn't everyone eat out on Sundays? Must be preparing for tomorrow's breakfast instead. How organised! Making dabba at this time.* She briefly contemplated preparing for the next day's breakfast as well.

Suddenly, she remembered why she had come to the kitchen. *Yes, the milk*, which took its time to boil. It didn't need to be boiled here but *Why take the chance?* thought Suchi, still unused to the novel way of life in Singapore, where milk could be poured straight from the refrigerated cartons without boiling or even heating up. But she did sometimes miss the daily Indian ritual of washing the milk bag, then slitting its neck neatly and pouring out the fresh milk into a deep heavy-bottomed pan, after adding a little water to make sure it did not burn. Besides, there was something pleasurable about watching milk boil until the wrinkly layer of cream formed on top, waiting for it to slowly swell like a crinkled balloon until it threatened to spill over, and then sadistically deflating it by switching off the cooking gas. Suchi kept a hawk's eye on the milk, using the few minutes to sneak in a little replay of her favourite dream, smiling happily.

Parth came to the table after much coaxing, and Suchi knew the next quarter of an hour was to be spent repeating the same instructions over and over: "Drink the milk. It will make you

strong. It will help you get full marks in Maths." She tiptoed to the living room windows. The sun shone aggressively through the gap between the curtains. Out of habit, she looked at the faint arc of the glistening gigantic Ferris wheel called the Singapore Flyer in the far distance. The large windows of their eighth-storey flat afforded a panoramic view of not only Singapore's impressive skyline, but also provided a kaleidoscope of life in the international community of this small island country.

Looking down to the ground floor, she saw the brown, tiled pavement interspersed with a green patch of neatly maintained, immaculate lawn. White spider lilies and birds of paradise bushes ringed the grassy patch. Beyond the grass, up a flight of steps, lay the most mesmerising part of the condominium: the swimming pool. The figure-eight-shaped iridescent blue body of water provided a meditative sight for Suchi every time she looked at it. Whatever hour of the day, the poolside offered a dynamic scene that never failed to fascinate her.

It was half past three in the afternoon, and despite the merciless heat of the day, the pool and poolside were crowded. Suchi wondered how some people shook off the inviting urge of indulging in an afternoon snooze to get scorched by the sweltering heat instead. There was no shade there except under the huge beige umbrellas, where some people sat reading books or looking on vacantly.

At the pool, the grown-ups either swam or simply sat on the edge with feet dangling in the water. Then some would get out of the pool, shake off the water and lie down, sprawled out on the lounge chairs—relaxing, looking up at the sun, burning themselves into a shade of red that was visible even from the

eighth storey. Children flitted in and out of the pool, throwing plastic balls or jumping in with colourful, inflated floats; Suchi's favourite was the alligator-shaped, long, green float on which children would sit and then spill into the pool. The people under the umbrellas would sometimes get up, stretch and leap into the pool, or someone would drag another to the edge of the pool and they would both eventually jump in with a huge splash. This is how it went all afternoon.

Despite the height at which she stood, Suchi could see the people clearly. The only thing she could not relish was the expressions on their faces, but she guessed they must be of delight and joy. Suchi often watched this scene with wonderment. It never failed to amaze her that these people could leave the cool air-conditioning of their homes at this time of the day in favour of the equatorial sun.

"Suchi, where shall we go out for dinner today?" Mandar asked, stifling a yawn through a burp and turning off the television. It was only mid-afternoon, but he was already thinking of dinner.

"Shall we go to McDonald's at City Square Mall? Latha says they have nice veg burgers," Suchi suggested.

"Arey, who wants to eat dry food on a Sunday? I am always eating burger-vurger at work. Let's go to Idli Palace. Shyam was saying they serve nice hot-hot idlis on a banana leaf, with three types of chutneys: red, white and green. They are very cheap also, not like that Punjabi place we went to last week."

"Okay." Suchi sighed in resignation. As usual, every Sunday, they would end up in Little India and try out one of the many Indian eateries. It was now a routine: they had Sunday afternoon

tea, then dressed up and took the MRT train to Little India. On the way, they would meet many of their Indian friends also eating out. Mandar called it "hotelling", which invariably meant visiting an Indian vegetarian restaurant after careful consideration of its menu and prices, along with tried-and-tested reviews from their Indian friends.

Suchi made Mandar his tea, adding ginger, cardamom and two teaspoons of sugar to the milky concoction, boiling it for just the right amount of time—the way he liked it. It was his Sunday special tea; on other days, she left out the cardamom. While he happily sipped his tea on the sofa, still dressed in his crinkly, soft, white kurta-pyjamas of the night before, she went back to looking out the window.

She surveyed the "pool people", as she thought of them, with more interest that day, and tried to pinpoint what had been puzzling her for a while. As she looked carefully, it was apparent even from the eighth storey that among this crowd of pool-lovers and sun-worshippers, *there were no Indians*.

Chapter 2

CAMPBELL GARDENS WAS a newish condominium, located near Kovan MRT station on the North East Line. It consisted of nine high-rise buildings with exotic, tongue-twisting names: Chrysanthemum, Hyacinth, Frangipani, Narcissus, Rhododendron, Edelweiss and so on.

Each building had similar flats, where far-from-similar people lived—Singaporean Chinese and Malays, Singaporean Indians, Indians from India, Indians from around the globe, Europeans, Eurasians, Australians, New Zealanders, Thais, Filipinos, Japanese and Indonesian families lived right next door to each other. Like Suchi's family, there were many other Indian families who lived here. It was mostly the menfolk who had acquired jobs in Singapore, and their wives had dutifully followed them here.

Two and a half years ago, in 2011, when Mandar was told by his office that they were sending him to Singapore, he was ecstatic. "An income in Singapore dollars! Imagine how much we could save. We could pay off the monthly instalments on our Ambarnath flat in just a few years. Who knows, maybe we could

even buy another 1BHK flat in Pune or Talegaon."

But Suchi was not so enthusiastic about moving away from India. She had grown up in Talegaon, a township near the city of Pune, only one hundred fifty kilometres or so southeast of Mumbai. Her husband's home in Mulund, a suburb of Mumbai, was ultra-modern for her, and even after so many years, she was still a Talegaon girl at heart. Moving to Singapore was naturally a big adventure. Her next-door neighbour in Mulund, who had never travelled beyond the suburbs of Byculla and Dombivili, had confidently warned her that "they eat snakes and cockroaches in Singapore". A close friend told her, "You will find it hard to find vegetarian food in Singapore". However, her cousin's sister-in-law's aunt had visited Singapore twelve years ago, and reassured her by saying, "Don't worry, Suchi. Singapore is just like Mumbai: tall buildings, small flats, hot, humid. You will feel at home. You will not even miss Mulund!"

After moving to Singapore, Suchi had realised that the aunt's description was almost correct. The tall buildings that looked like stacked Lego blocks did indeed remind her of their co-operative housing society in Mulund. However, in Mulund, the front doors of flats bore bronze or wooden nameplates as a testimony to their occupants: "Mr. So-and-so, BA (Hons)" or "Dr (Mrs) So-and-so, MBBS (Bombay 1986)". The façades proudly displayed not only names but also education, marital status and caste for public consumption. But in Campbell Gardens, there was a degree of anonymity; it was hard to tell who lived behind the nameless doors. One could hazard a guess from the decorations on the door, or the footwear that lay on the floor or the shoe stand, or just by simply peeking in through the outer metallic

trellis gate if the inner door was open for ventilation, which was invariably the case. A colourful toran on the doorframe, a red auspicious swastik on the door, a colourful rangoli pattern on the floor, or Kolhapuri chappals on the shoe stand signified an Indian household.

Like in Mulund, she could look into the windows of flats in buildings opposite, though the sights were different. Suchi often stood at her bedroom window as she leisurely combed her mid-back-length hair. Some days, she would spot the woman who performed handstands in the bedroom of a third-storey flat in Narcissus. On other days, on the second storey of Edelweiss, a group of four older people played some sort of game around a square table for hours together, which Mandar explained was called mahjong. On the fifth storey of Edelweiss, a man would mop his floors every morning, as his fluffy teacup Pomeranian played hide-and-seek with the curtains; she wondered if there were any women in his flat. Then, of course, there was the lady who hula-hooped every evening in her living room while her family members watched television or studied or read newspapers on the floor. She wondered how old this woman was. Or was it a girl?

One day, after a particularly enjoyable combing session, she pulled out the hair from her comb. Then, after twisting it all into a knot, she released the delicate hairball, allowing it to fly out of the open window. Her eyes dreamily followed as it drifted towards the general direction of the mopping man's flat, then changed direction towards the pool.

Her son Parth let out a shocked yelp. "Aai, what are you doing?" he shouted as he sprinted out the front door.

Startled, Suchi caught up to him at the lift lobby, where he was pressing the down button frantically. "What happened, Parth?" she called out, wondering whether setting a hairball free had some supernatural effect on her son in this foreign country.

"Aai, you threw rubbish out of the window! I am going down to pick it up." *Rubbish? It's only hair*, thought Suchi, but Parth was now in the lift, with his mother following.

The liberated hairball was never found and Parth was inconsolable.

"Aai, they taught us in school: you must not litter!" he wailed. "The hairball could land in the pool and someone might swallow it." He googled to find out what would happen if a person ate hair, and was alarmed to discover that it could lead to something called a bezoar in their stomach, a tightly-packed concretion that had to be removed surgically if it got big enough. He expounded this new knowledge to his much-embarrassed mother; afterward, the utility room became the new grooming room, so that all deceptively innocuous hairballs exited through the garbage chute.

Suchi had to agree that the humidity of Singapore rivalled that of Mumbai. Actually, it won, hands down. Sweat poured down in rivulets even after a shower, leaving one wondering if it was water or perspiration that was infinitely soaking the bath towel. But Mumbai had its winters too, while Singapore had only summer all year long. In Mumbai, the air-conditioner was a prized possession in Suchi's family. While every home had ceiling fans, aircon was affordable only for some homes in their Mulund neighbourhood. The lone aircon in their joint-family home occupied pride of place in the bedroom of the parents-

in-law, who lived under the same roof. Being higher up on the family tree certainly came with several privileges. The noisy machine was switched on only in summer, and the entire family would gather in that one room to enjoy the artificially cool air for a few hours.

In Singapore, Suchi revelled in the luxury of aircon units, which were installed in all main rooms inside the home, as well as in buses, trains and shopping malls. The cool air often made her doze off. Several times on the MRT, the freezing air from above sent her peacefully off into oblivion, waking to drool on her chin. It was on the MRT that she'd had many versions of that recurrent dream of swimming, and she had lost count of how many times she had ended up at the wrong station. Once, when the swimming dream extended to a few hundred idyllic laps, she woke up refreshed at Potong Pasir station, when she was supposed to alight at Farrer Park!

"How do you get lost all the time?" her husband asked. "Even Parth knows how to find his way on the MRT!"

She had not told Mandar about her dream. It was her little secret. Not even Parth knew it, but she suspected that he was getting ideas. About six months ago, these fantasies had begun and startled her, shocking her sensibilities that she dared to dream something as naughty as swimming. And now, these aspirational flashes were getting even more frequent and ambitious, which was strange since Suchi had a fearful relationship with water. She hated it because it made her think the worst. *What if I drown?* She had heard stories of people falling into wells in her ancestral village, in Pali; wells were haunted sites, so obviously some kind of evil spirit lived in there that pulled people into

its bottomless belly. She felt helpless in the presence of a huge body of water like a sea or ocean, which had no beginning or end, and threatened to swallow her up if she went too close. Then there were whirlpools to be scared of, because they were thought to suck people into their vortices. But most of all, she felt vulnerable because she could not swim; she did not even know what it felt like to be in water above the knees or, heavens forbid, any higher.

She had known knee-deep water when the drains in Mulund got blocked during the rains, flooding the roads with gutter water. The only time she had been in such water was when she was a teenager, at a college trip to Khandala, during the monsoon season. Although the waterfalls cascading through the Sahyadri mountains had been magnificent, they threatened to sweep her off her feet and carry her into the sea, which was thousands of miles away. As the boys in her class playfully splashed water on the girls, she panicked when the water hit her face and then went into her nose and down the back of her throat. She felt like she was going to die. If a few millilitres of water shooting up her nostrils could cause this asphyxiating feeling, she could only imagine what a whole lot more would do!

Paradoxically, Suchi also found herself drawn to water. The cool refreshing feeling, the calmness, the magical smoothness all drew her to wonder what it must feel like to be drenched and be engulfed by its presence. She had felt its magic as she dipped her feet into the Arabian Sea on the beaches of Goa, where she and Mandar had gone for their honeymoon. The frothy waves caressing her feet as the grainy sand shifted underneath made her want to capture that feeling forever.

In Singapore, she found water everywhere. In the oppressive tropical heat, artificial water features were a much-needed quencher. Huge fountains that danced to music would spray refreshing droplets as one stood next to them for a photograph. Mini water jets spouted from the ground where children, as well as adults, could enjoy a sudden soaking from underneath. There were water parks with giant buckets that drenched one to the bone, and waterfalls that cascaded down the sides of buildings. It was so exciting to discover these water bodies in the middle of Singapore's concrete-and-glass jungle. She loved sitting on the edge of the huge pool on the terrace of VivoCity Mall, or wading through the ankle-deep water, following Parth as he excitedly ran through the water, feeling like a child too. The cooling liquid rejuvenated her feet, tired from hours of window-shopping done in shoes that bit into her skin. And in the twilight, this pool took on a magical quality combined with the lights of Sentosa in the distance and the cable cars moving through the sky above.

Then there were the swimming pools. She had seen the little blue squares and rectangles of water as her plane first landed in Singapore, everywhere in different shapes. There were two pools at Campbell Gardens: the large one that she could see from her flat, and the baby pool across a small bridge that hid it from Suchi's view.

One of the things about moving to Singapore was that her family now had the luxury to indulge their son Parth in as many activities as possible. Like Suchi, Parth absolutely loved the pool at first sight; he wanted to jump in with his jeans and tee-shirt on and had to be stopped.

"Wait, Parth! You need a swimsuit. And swimming classes."

"Why do I need classes for everything? I am sure I can swim. It is so easy."

"Yes, but you still need to learn. See all those little children in the water? They look your age...and they are still learning. Let us find you a swimming teacher."

So Parth was enrolled in swimming lessons with an Australian teacher called Jane. Every Friday, he would excitedly get into his swimming trunks, grab his goggles and head off. Within two lessons, he was already floating on his front, and Jane was now teaching him the front crawl.

"One, two, three, breathe!" yelled Jane to her students, most aged ten and under. Clutching colourful floats, the children fearlessly practised their arm movements, while their feet fluttered like butterflies. It didn't matter to them that the water was deep in the middle of the pool, or that, for many of them, their feet couldn't touch the bottom even at the shallow end. They simply dashed off and did what Jane commanded. Heavily tanned to the point of appearing dry and shrivelled, and with a fit swimmer's body, Jane stood outside the pool for most of the time. She had taught many children in Campbell Gardens to swim.

The lessons were at 5pm, when it was still sunny. Suchi instinctively sat as much in the shade of a beige patio umbrella as she could. For years, her mother had nagged her to stay out of the sun to save her fair skin from downgrading a shade. She had been born fair, which was not surprising as she belonged to a coastal community in the region of Maharashtra. Most of her clan were fair with brown eyes, or even green eyes. But some of her cousins, especially the younger ones who had gone trekking or gallivanting in the hot Pune sun, had reduced their

fairness, thereby decreasing their marriage-market potential by a factor of three.

“See, Suchi, aren’t you glad I stopped you from going with Rekha and Priya? Look at how dark they have become! Who is going to marry them?” her mother had smugly commented.

Suchi was understandably proud of her fair skin. If she was to be out in the sun for more than a few minutes, she would make sure her head and part of her face were wrapped in a scarf-like odhni, or that she carried an umbrella. She had fond memories of returning home after college and having her mother lovingly mix dahi and turmeric for her to apply on her face and arms—just in case a few melanin granules decided to assert themselves and diminish the fairness of her skin. Many an afternoon had been spent grinding a stick of ambe halad with milk on a stone grinder, and then smearing herself with the ambe halad paste, an Ayurvedic remedy to make sure she remained fair-skinned over the years.

So here she was, in sun-drenched Singapore in the five o’clock sun, hiding away under the shield of an umbrella and behaving like she was allergic to sunlight. And she was not alone.

“So sunny, no?” exclaimed Latha, whose son also attended the swimming lessons.

“Yes, I wish I had goggles to cover my eyes.”

“Arey, I saw some good ones for ten Sing dollars in Mustafa. They were for men, but very nice.”

“Okay.”

Suddenly Suchi’s gaze was diverted to the pool, just as Latha muttered under her breath, “Arey, look at that woman.”

Suchi stared at the tall, lithe woman who was climbing down

the steps of the pool clad in nothing more than a length of cloth enough to make up a saree blouse.

“So bold, no? These gora women wear such daring clothes,” Latha said.

“So nice, no? She can swim,” said Suchi.

Latha and Suchi continued staring at the woman as she swam several lengths of the pool, without a break. She sailed through the water like an elegant dolphin.

A group of Aussie kids appeared from nowhere and started pushing each other into deep end. They looked about four or five years of age, and their parents were nowhere to be seen. A girl who seemed to be in her early twenties followed them vacantly to the pool, but sat on the concrete ledge, hypnotised by her smartphone. Suchi and Latha tried hard to avert their eyes from her hot pants.

“She is so slim,” remarked Latha.

“That’s why I don’t want a maid. Too much distraction in the home.”

“Then you can get an Indian maid.”

“Hmm, they are also good-looking, not good to have.”

“True. That Mugdha’s maid is so nice-looking, long hair and everything. She looks like the Ma’am and Mugdha looks like the maid,” Latha whispered gleefully. Now they had found a topic close to their hearts, and continued gossiping.

After a while, Suchi turned her attention to the group of children who were still horsing around at the pool. Some of them were doing cartwheels at the poolside before jumping into the water. *What daredevils*, she thought.

Just then, Peggy—mother of one of the Aussie kids, and one




About the Author

VRUSHALI JUNNARKAR IS a dentist by training. When not practising, teaching or researching in dentistry, she contributes opinion pieces to a women's empowerment website, *Women's Web*, and writes for the *Times of India* on various aspects of living abroad as an Indian. She has also been published in *What We Inherit: Growing Up Indian* (2022). *The Campbell Gardens Ladies' Swimming Class* is her first novel.



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“Swimming becomes not just a metaphor for cultural adaptation and survival, but also for personal freedom, transcendence and even redemption in this heart-warming novel.”

—**CYRIL WONG, MULTI-AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *THIS SIDE OF HEAVEN***

An eclectic group of Indian women living in a Singaporean condominium are determined to learn how to swim. Suchi, Nayanika, Latha, Radhika and the others will need to grapple with body image issues and conservative values in order to accomplish their goal. As they struggle then glide through the clear water of the condo’s swimming pool, they will paddle against the tide of ingrained beliefs, tread carefully past family expectations, and dive deep into their own psyches to let go of things held dear.

FICTION

ISBN 978-981-51-0526-1



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